Inbar Graiver, ***Asceticism of the Mind: Forms of Attention and Self-Transformation in Late Antique Monasticism.*** Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2018.

In this exemplary study, historian Inbar Graiver demonstrates the potential for dialogue between history and cognitive science in the hands of a skilled historian well versed in the scientific literature. Building on the wealth of research on early Christian ascetic practice as a means of disciplining the body, Graiver shifts her focus to asceticism as a means of training the mind, transforming the self, and restoring the practitioner's relationship with God. Drawing on the extensive sources from the Egyptian, Gazan, and Sinaitic monastic traditions that document the process of self-transformation, she argues for the importance of "mental training" in "creating new psychological capacities and exceptional cognitive skills, in the service of contemplation" (p. 2).

The first chapter asks how it is possible to discuss "self-transformation" at all in late antiquity, given that the idea of the self is the product of a historical development and neither classical Greek nor Latin had a terms that corresponds to the modern notion of a self. She argues that under the influence of the Stoics, Plato, and eventually the Neoplatonists, an explicit discussion of the self emerged in late antiquity that was taken up in the Pauline letters, the early monastic literature, and by theologians, such as Clement and Origin. In this literature, the self was approached both as an object of philosophical and theological discussion, which gave rise to conceptions of an ideal self, and the self as experienced in practice, which gave rise to first-person narratives that recounted practitioners' efforts to achieve the ideal self. The monastic ideal was "a renewed mind" (Romans 12:2) that was stable, unified, and open to God. In practice,

however, monks experienced their minds as unstable, easily distracted, prone to wander, and beset by evil spirits. The resulting tension between an ideal self and the actual embodied self, Graiver argues, provides a means of reconstructing "a more complex and dynamic picture of monastic notions of selfhood" than does the traditional distinction between soul and body (p. 70). Chapter 2 discusses the importance of self-control, particularly control of attention, in cultivating the inner unity and stability that characterized the ideal self. Chapters 3 and 4 elaborate the problems and setbacks monks confronted as they attempted to do this. Chapter 5 examines the new level of control over automatic patterns of thinking and acting that some monks were able to achieve using linguistic as well as cognitive (attention management) strategies to retrain their attention.

In addition to its sophisticated methodology, which I turn to below, two aspects of the book particularly stand out: the treatment of demonology and the identification of linguistic, as well as cognitive, mechanisms of transformation. For many readers, historians and psychologists alike, Graiver's refusal to dismiss "monastic demonology as literary elaboration, an expression of superstition, or something completely incomprehensible to modern readers" (p. 3) may be the book's most surprising feature. She lays the foundation for her discussion of demonology in chapter three where she focuses on common problems, such as mind wandering and distraction, that – paradoxically -- often increased in response to monks efforts to control them. From this she concludes that "excessive and anxious efforts to concentrate on the thought of God and to expel sinful or mundane thoughts from consciousness … may have been the

source of many of the problems recorded in the ascetic literature of Egypt and Palestine" (p. 128).

She extends this argument in chapter 5 to "a demonically induced psychological state characterized by uncontrollable preoccupation with sinful thoughts" (p. 129). She compares this problem with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), but recognizing both similarities and differences, particularly in their understanding of the self and its relationship to the world (p. 145), she is careful not to equate them or simply explain the former in light of the latter. Instead, she uses "obsession" to refer to their common feature, which she describes as an "uncontrollable preoccupation with unwanted, intrusive thoughts, images, or urges, whatever their source may be" (p. 133).

In both cases, she finds that "the tendency to attach special significance to thoughts, to advocate a perfect control over them, and to appraise them as morally equivalent to actions may have served as fertile ground for the development of obsessions" (p. 146). These common features, however, are viewed differently in the two contexts. Whereas modern psychiatry would view these tendencies as problematic, the monastic system of mental training presupposed and promoted them, as do other meditative traditions. Thus, as Graiver indicates, there is evidence of "meditation-induced obsessions" resulting from Asian meditation practices as well (pp. 151-155). In the early Christian context, obsessive thoughts were attributed to demons who "besieged" and "assaulted" the practitioner, leaving the practitioner self-absorbed and isolated.

In her final chapter, Graiver discusses the practices the monks used to work though these blockages. Like modern therapy, their practice involved self-disclosure, but in contrast to modern therapies the goal was not to recover their old ("normal") self, but

to achieve a stable self that could maintain a consistent focus on God. Typically, monks met weekly with an experienced "spiritual father" to share their struggles so that they could be discussed. Fortunately, correspondence and other records not only gave Graiver access to the matters that they discussed, but the form in which they expressed them.

In analyzing the way they referred to their thoughts, Graiver discovered a linguistic strategy that directed the monks' attention to their thoughts, rather than away from them, by means of an usual grammatical construction. Instead of using the common Greek expressions for "I thought," monks typically referred to the thought as the grammatical subject and themselves the object as in: "the thought tells me" or "my thought wants" or "my thought excites [or accuses or troubles] me" (pp. 166-167). Graiver was not able to find this "inverted experiential construction," as it is technically known, in other ancient or late antique Greek writing, which suggests it was deliberately utilized in this context as a means of transforming thoughts by personifying them as other than themselves. Through the repeated use of this formulation, she argues, monks came to view the thoughts as "not them," which stripped them of their personal significance and allowed them to fade away (p. 173).

Methodologically, the book is premised on a series of carefully constructed comparisons. Just as she did not equate the monks' demonically-induced psychological state with obsessive compulsive disorder, she respects the differences between early Christian and modern theories of mind, while seeking points of commonality that allow her to identify similarities and differences. Thus, she sets up her overall comparison between early Christian asceticism and the findings of cognitive science based on their shared understanding of the role of attention in mental training. Within each chapter, she

switches back and forth between the two points of view, each clearly delineated in section headings. Thus, in addition to the research on attention (pp. 114-119) and OCD (pp. 140-145) included in chapters 3 and 4, she discusses the psychological literature on "possible selves" (pp. 37-39) and the cognitive mechanisms that inform mind wandering (pp. 57-59) in chapter 1, psychological research on various forms of self-control (pp 86-88) in chapter 2, and research on neuroplasticity in chapter 5 (pp. 177-183).

Overall, the comparison allows her to identify shared mental mechanisms, e.g., that efforts to control thoughts often make them more prominent rather than less, that are at work in both contexts, even though assessed and treated differently. The most pronounced differences, thus, lie in the way they understand the self in relation to the world, in their "diagnosis" of their situations, and the goals toward which their practices are aimed. Early Christian conceived of their selves as porous, as situated in a battleground of demonic and divine presences, and mental training as a means of limiting incursions of the demonic and maximizing the ascetic practitioner's connection to the divine. Modern psychiatry, by way of contrast, conceives of the self as bounded, as situated in a framework of mental illness and health, and mental training as a means of regaining mental health. Graiver's careful attention to method provides a model for drawing on scientific research to tease apart culture-specific and cross-cultural aspects of human self-construction and world-making. This is an exemplary study and a major contribution to the comparative study of cognition and culture.

Ann Taves

University of California at Santa Barbara